# Understanding and Coping With Guilt and Shame in Recovery

Many people list issues with "guilt and shame" as a critical factor related to substance abuse issues and addiction. Therefore, learning to cope with guilt and shame cane be an integral part of the healing process for many individuals. Interestingly, the words guilt and shame are often used interchangeably. However, in reality, the two similar feelings can be based on opposing viewpoints. Here we review ways to view at guilt and shame in the recovery process.

## What Is Guilt?

**Guilt**: a feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime, wrong, etc., whether real or imagined.

Another simple way to explain guilt is that guilt is the uncomfortable feeling we often experience when we have done something wrong. And believe it or not, guilt can be positive and even necessary during addiction recovery. Features of guilt include:

- Guilt is commonly based on a failure of doing, which often is a direct result of our behaviors and choices.
- Guilt is based on values, morals, and standards, all of which are necessary and important with regard to guiding our behavior in a positive direction.
- Guilt involves a violation of standards.
- Guilt can be a motivator for positive change. In other words, when we do something wrong, then we feel guilty about it, those feelings can motivate us to change our behavior so we don't make the same mistake or negative choices

## How to Consider Guilt in Addiction Recovery

When looking at guilt as a violation of standards, it is important to think of the conditions of this feeling. It is completely normal to feel guilt on occasion because we all make mistakes and incorrect choices. But remember, one person's standards can be very different from another's, which can result in very different ways people experience (or do not experience) guilt. Consider the following:

- Whose standards were violated?
- Where did these standards come from? (Our family, our experience, our beliefs, peer group, society, media, politics, our own ethics, etc.?)
- Is it possible never to feel guilty?

# 10 Tips for How to Cope With Feelings Of Guilt In Addiction Recovery

### 1. Face it.

Face the feelings of guilt. Release feelings of guilt by talking about them, sharing, confessing, getting honest.

### 2. Learn to forgive yourself.

Do you judge yourself too harshly?

### 3. Examine the origins of your guilt.

Is the reason that you feel guilt rational and reasonable? Inappropriate or irrational guilt involves feeling guilty in relation to something that in reality you had little or nothing to do with or in relation to something that in reality was beyond your control.

### 4. Change.

Change the related behavior so that the action or actions triggering feelings of guilt and remorse cease. Simply put: If something you are doing is causing you to feel guilty, then stop doing it and you will no longer have a reason to feel guilty any longer.

### 5. Clarify.

Clarify new values for yourself and take realistic action in the present instead of dwelling on the past. Think about positive action you can take in your life now to feel better. You are never too old to reevaluate your goals, values and priorities for the better

### 6. Practice.

Practice forgiving others, helping others and doing good for others. Learning to empathize and forgive others can help you to learn to forgive yourself.

### 7. Apologize or just seek peace.

Is there something you can say or do in order to try to show that you are willing to make peace where there has been hurt, conflict, or disagreement?

### 8. Let go.

The past is the past, so at some point, even if there are things you have done to hurt others, if you are sorry now, you need to let them go. Or, if you are truly remorseful over something you have done wrong in the past and you tried to make peace or amends, you can still forgive yourself even when others do not forgive you. By the same token, if someone who hurt you is sorry, learn to let it go yourself so you can forget about the hurt and then focus on moving forward

**9. Commit to the present.**

Was there a legitimate cause for your past actions that was beyond your control at the time? For example, perhaps you hurt others while you were experiencing untreated mental illness or as the result of active drug or alcohol addiction that you are now making efforts to properly care for. Instead focus on behavior change which will influence better decisions in the present and future.

**10. Avoid shame.**

Shame is a basic feeling of inferiority. Shame involves the perception of oneself as a failure or feeling unacceptable to others. Shame can involve feeling "flawed" "unworthy" or "not good enough".

Shame often involves forgetting or disregarding the fact that we are human and we make mistakes but that alone does not make us less of a person. Shame is about self- blame and is directly linked to low self-esteem. Shame often comes from the negative messages we may have received as children from our family of origin. (People who were put down or insulted as children, either directly or indirectly, may end up much more prone to shame-based thinking as adults, although this does not always have to be the case)

## Getting Past Guilt

Irrational thoughts and beliefs can fuel shame and inappropriate guilt. These untruths can perpetuate negative feelings we have about ourselves. Take a look at these statements, and check your own beliefs regarding them.

- I must get everyone's approval.
- I must be perfect.
- Mistakes are bad.
- If I am not like _____ then I am not a valuable person.
- Everyone can see my faults.
- I am not worthy of forgiveness.

## Put It into Practice

Think of the rational and reasonable alternative for each of the above shame-based thoughts. For example, for the first one, "In must get everyone's approval" the more rational alternative might be something like, "I can still feel good about myself even if some people do not approve of me". Try this for the rest of the statements above. It is worth it not to give up on working through your guilt and shame issues.